

TWO GOSPELS: NON-RESISTANCE AND “REVOLUTIONARY FORCE”

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

L EON TROTZKY, the creator of the Russian “red” army, has been called a brilliant writer and a remorseless logician. Bernard Shaw dubbed him “the prince of pamphleteers.” He is audacious, fluent, well-read, and full of confidence in the irrefutable soundness of his own arguments. Even opponents have been impressed by his controversial methods and his command of *seemingly relevant* facts, historical and contemporary.

In his new book, *Whither England?*—which predicts the collapse and destruction of the British kingdom and empire, and which contends that American competition and American plutocracy are destined to give old England the *coup-de-grace*—Mr. Trotsky stops to discuss the attacks of radicals, labor leaders and evolutionary reformers generally on the gospel of “revolutionary force,” and to dispose of them once and for all. In this part of the volume—which alone concerns us here, Trotsky writes with an air of easy triumph. The opponents of terror and force as revolutionary weapons are called sanctimonious hypocrites, weak sentimentalists, dupes of bourgeois sophists, ignoramuses, what not. They are accused of glaring self-contradictions and childish misconceptions. To disbelieve in force, says Trotsky, is to disbelieve in life, to violate all canons of reasoning, to betray the cause of true democracy and justice. Nothing can be, has been, or ever will be accomplished without force. We owe what is best in modern society to revolutions, insurrections, strikes, threats—in short, force. How can the proletariat renounce force when his turn has come to demand simple justice? At what point does force become wicked and immoral?

All this is mere rhetoric. Let us follow Mr. Trotsky’s argument and see how rational it really is, what evidence or considerations

it rests upon, and how the conclusions and premises are established by the aggressive author.

In the first place, Trotzky points out that those who repudiate force in revolution are inconsistent if they support it in the cause of law and order. Not to believe in force, he says, is to be a non-resistant; and the non-resistant is bound to oppose *all* forms of punishment. Those who believe that the state has the moral right to punish lawbreakers, argues Trotzky, cannot logically deny the right of a revolutionary government or party to use force against *its* foes—the violators of *its* laws and policies.

It is true, of course, that there are very few rigorously consistent non-resistants in the world. Even the late Count Tolstoy, who preached that doctrine uncompromisingly, admitted to friendly cross-examiners that he could not be certain that he would live up to it in all circumstances. He might, for instance, he owned, use force against an armed burglar if he saw no other way of saving a young girl from violence and outrage. Jesus himself did not always practice his resist-not-evil injunction, for he resisted and attacked evil when he drove the usurers and money-changers from the temple. But what of this? It is absurd to assert that one must be either a non-resistant or a champion of force and violence no matter by whom employed, or under what conditions and with what safeguards against inhuman abuse.

To common sense it is obvious that the punishment of duly tried and convicted lawbreakers by the state cannot be pleaded as an excuse for lynching mobs, or for highway robbery and murder. The state punishes under laws and standards of conduct that reflect the sentiment of the community. The punishment is not arbitrary; it is preceded by inquiry, trial and appeal. The offender has every chance to establish his innocence, or to protect his rights even when guilty. The mob and the criminal punish innocent persons and know nothing of restraint, of process of law, of necessary checks and safeguards.

Again, there is a difference between force applied in a civilized and humane way and force used brutally, savagely, vindictively. Revolutionary governments often plume themselves on their severity toward counter-revolutionists, or toward bribe-taking officials, or toward profiteers and speculators. There is no virtue in this severity. The so-called "bourgeois" governments would be fiercely denounced were *they* to do the same thing. The recognition of civil rights and the merciful treatment of most criminals are among

the victories of reason and decency over barbarism and cruelty. Revolutionary governments, being insecure, revert to barbarism or to martial law, but that is retrogression, not advance.

Force is indeed a necessary evil, but it is being applied with more and more reluctance and with less and less severity. Trotzky is or pretends to be unaware of the evolution of penology, the prison-reform movement, the parole and probation systems, the "honor farms," and the steady elimination of the degrading and brutal elements in punishment. Like all fanatics and extremists, his doctrine is "All or Nothing," whereas social amelioration is a slow, evolutionary process.

Mr. Trotzky next takes up the distinction often made by advocates of force between governments that are tyrannical, that tolerate no opposition and no criticism, and liberal, democratic governments that permit legal forms and methods of opposition. He sees no substance in this distinction. If, he says, force is justifiable as against czars and despots who suppress free speech and free discussion, and who resist democratic demands, force is justifiable as against the so-called liberal, democratic and free governments, because, forsooth these governments are very far from being as progressive and democratic as they profess to be. Take England, for example, says Trotzky. It claims to be thoroughly democratic, so far as politics and government are concerned, and this claim is admitted by radicals and labor leaders. But what are the facts? Is there universal suffrage in England? There is not, since no man under twenty-one is allowed to vote and no woman under thirty. Workingmen and workingwomen, says Trotzky, mature early, and are as capable of exercising judgment and defending their interests at eighteen, say, as at twenty-one, or at thirty. The privileged classes deliberately disfranchise the wage workers of certain ages because they fear them. But, be this as it may, the proof is supposed to be complete that England is not a complete or genuine democracy. It follows that force may be used by the workers to secure political or economic reforms which they cannot obtain by a restricted suffrage.

What a tissue of fallacies and superficialities! There is not the smallest reason to believe that the extension of the suffrage to all persons of eighteen—and surely even Trotzky would not demand votes for children!—would alter the political situation in England. The young sons and daughters of the upper and middle classes would have to be enfranchised as well as the sons and daughters of the proletariat, and the relative positions of the classes would re-

main the same as now. The labor-radical elements would remain a minority of the voting population, and would still be unable to carry their measures. Would force be justifiable then on their part? If so, *any* minority may use force against a majority, and democracy is abandoned in favor of tyranny.

Besides, let it be granted that the extension of suffrage in the directions pointed out by Trotsky is desirable and dictated by the principle of democracy. Such extension manifestly may be expected to take place in the normal course of affairs. Many important, far-reaching reforms have been achieved without the use of force, and many more will be thus achieved in the future. Democracy is constantly gaining ground, despite the apparent and temporary successes of bolshevism or of Fascismo. There is, in truth, no permanent alternative to democracy. Tyranny begets rebellion and white terror leads to red terror. Majorities will not long submit tamely to usurpers or cliques. The suppression of free discussion, independent organs of opinion and legitimate associations merely drives the opposition to adopt subterranean methods.

Mr. Trotsky may point out that the dictatorship is no communist invention, and that historians of the most conservative sentiments have nothing but praise for *some* dictators of the past. This is true, and it would be foolish to assert that today no conceivable situation would justify a temporary dictatorship of a minority. But Trotsky is seeking to defend, not a dictatorship under certain very exceptional conditions, but the dictatorship of the communist group in Russia, as well as his advocacy of like dictatorships in England, Germany, France, Belgium and America. He believes that there is a virtue in revolutionary terror. He has the zeal of an old inquisitor and burner of heretics. Like some of the characters in Anatole France's *The Gods Athirst*, Trotsky glorifies and almost sanctifies revolutionary force, treats it as sacred and possessed of miraculous powers of redemption. This attitude, of course, is utterly irrational. Communists are mere men and women who hold certain opinions. There is no reason why those who entertain different opinions should humbly efface themselves or submit to oppression and repression. Differences of opinion suggest compromise, and in all democratic governments legislation and policy represent compromises entered into after full and spirited discussion.

If communists are entitled to use "revolutionary force," then reactionaries, Fascists, royalists and others are also entitled to use force. The Trotskys cannot condemn the Mussolinis, and the Mus-

solinis cannot condemn any type of usurper who may succeed in capturing the army and navy.

It has been urged, indeed, that in Russia communism has so far maintained itself, and may succeed in establishing itself, because it is a *religion* and not merely an *economic system*. But Fascismo, too, is a religion, and any political creed, not excepting the most reactionary, may be fervently espoused by many and exalted to the religious plane. Mr. John Maynard Keynes has been reminding us of the melancholy fact that most of the great religions have used force ruthlessly. So they have, but they have survived by virtue of their mystical elements. Communism abjures mysticism and supernaturalism, and will have to be judged solely by its material fruits. It cannot give peace or happiness either to the proletariat, in whose name it speaks, or to the intelligent and cultured elements. It cannot give prosperity, and that condemns it in the eyes of the working classes; and it cannot satisfy the spiritual needs of the men of science, of the artists or of the experimental and open-minded social reformers. As a religion, what has communism promised? Equality, solidarity, fraternity, respect for human dignity. None of these desiderata are the monopoly of a theoretical communism, for genuine democracy and rational libertarianism fully recognize them and strive to realize them in everyday practice. Voluntary, altruistic communism may be a conceivable and even a worthy ideal; compulsory communism, on the other hand, is a grotesque and self-contradictory paradox.

Mr. Trotzky's defense of tyranny and revolutionary force, we conclude, rests on false premises, far-fetched analogies, bad reasoning and willful misinterpretation of the course of political, economic and social evolution.